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Doing qualitative research: Methodological reflections on researching teachers work

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Abstract

Reflexive commitments tend to be lacking, particularly from the perspective of early career scholars. This is particularly true in relation to published research, but evident in doctoral studies exploring teachers work. Using principles of phenomenological reflexivity, this methodological paper explores the critical incidents that have come to shape a qualitative, ethnographical case study before entering the field. Key findings highlight four implications for novice researchers: an engagement with critical independent reflection, critical friendship, skills development through academic modules and reflexive reading, and communities of practice. The paper calls for continued attention to the methodological framing of research, particularly during and after entering the field.

KEYWORDS
positionality, reflection, reflexivity, teachers work

1 | INTRODUCTION

While there is an ongoing dialogue in qualitative research exploring positionality and reflexivity, little research explores how they intersect with shaping the methodological decisions of doctoral researchers exploring teachers work, especially before going into the field. This methodological paper aims to address this gap, by examining the critical incidents that have come to shape a doctoral study in progress. The paper begins by introducing the context, methodological decisions and research questions. The findings are organised into four sections, (1) I ain't quite where I think I am; (2) how am I supposed to manage my infallible beliefs?; (3) gradually, it's coming into view;

(4) trying to adjust to what's been there all along. To help contextualise, the paper draws on a doctoral study in progress which is detailed in the next section.

2 | CONTEXT

The aim of the ongoing doctoral study is to investigate the influence of neoliberal performativity on primary teachers pedagogical habitus. Neoliberal performativity is a culture where teachers work is organised, delivered and assessed against performance benchmarks and accountability measurements, using sanctions and rewards to control and incentivise staff (Ball, 2003), while a teacher's pedagogical habitus is a set of embodied dispositions that influence a teacher's way of being, seeing, thinking and doing (Feldman, 2016). Contributing to the corpus of knowledge pertaining neoliberal performativity and teachers dispositions, the doctoral study seeks to confirm and/or reject existing dispositions amongst teachers, yet—by using Bourdieu's notion of habitus—also identify nuances. A large proportion of primary teachers, for example, have been socialised in a post-performative era, which suggests that teachers could find pleasure in performativity (Wilkins et al., 2021). Furthermore, by providing primary teachers a liminal space for contemplating their dispositions, the doctoral study aims to contribute to professional practice, highlighting how teachers pedagogical habitus could be maintained and/or supported. Two research questions underpin the study: (1) In what ways (if at all) does performativity influence teachers pedagogical habitus? (2) How (if at all) can teachers pedagogical habitus be maintained and/or supported?

Since performativity can interact with teachers pedagogical habitus in different ways, and while I (the first author) would need to hermeneutically understand these different interpretations, I have chosen a qualitative (interpretivist) approach. Within this approach, I am guided by principles of an ethnographic case study design. Three primary school teachers, representing each different phase (Early Years, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2) in one single school, will be examined. Given performativity is 'out there', yet simultaneously inside the teacher's soul (Ball, 2003), I have been drawn to non-participant ethnographical observations and document analysis (to explore examples of neoliberal performativity in the school), and semi-structured interviews and written narratives (to explore the meanings behind teachers pedagogical habitus). Resultant data will be examined using principles of thematic analysis, while—utilising a reflexive journal—I am committed to positionality and reflexivity, two postmodern notions that have intersected with shaping my methodological decisions.

3 | METHODOLOGICAL DECISIONS

3.1 | Reflexivity and novice researchers

The positivist paradigm asserts that since phenomena exist independently of an individual's means of apprehension, good knowledge can only be achieved by empiricism; therefore, the knower and what can be known are separable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Running counter to these assumptions, reflexivity is the acknowledgement of one's subjectivity, often through the lens of social structures (race, class, gender etc.). However, given the assumptions of the positivist paradigm, where self-reflection could be deemed indulgent and a hindrance to the research endeavour, alongside the myriad of myopic conceptualisations of its definition, doctoral researchers struggle to grasp reflexivity (Chaffee et al., 2016). Furthermore, while naming and understanding race, gender and class is indeed an important part of reflexivity, novice researchers often see social structures as fixed and linear, which means that knowing which one is more influential tends to be perplexing (Mason-Bish, 2019). Finally, even when doctoral researchers embrace the unitary, essentialist self, writing with personal pronouns (and confess, neutralise or explain away their influence), they are falling into an apologetic stance of a fractured reflexivity, limiting the

potential value of subjectivity (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006; Hammersley, 2008). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that so many novice researchers dismiss reflexive commitments.

3.2 | The importance of being reflexive

When thoughtfully applied, reflexivity is known to enhance co-construction. In this orientation, the researcher, being methodologically as close as possible to the participant/s and studying the phenomenon from inside out (emic), can offer their understandings and emotions about the research phenomenon. This can clarify judgements, broaden options and enhance conceptual understanding (Cousin, 2013). However, since it is considered impossible to enter the minds of participant/s, researchers could never, irrespective of the level of shared conceptual understanding, develop a full, complete interpretation of the participant's social reality (Etherington, 2007). In fact, since we are ultimately in charge of the research interpretation, often with preunderstandings of, and an emotional attachment to, the phenomenon, are we not, in some ways, just researching ourselves?—an autobiography under the pretence of researching others. Furthermore, insider researchers (due to their preunderstandings of, and emotional attachment to, the phenomenon) are more susceptible to excessive control of the data collection, inappropriate interpretation of the findings and inadequate probing for feelings and meanings (Chew-Graham et al., 2002). That said, if we situate our biography to the context of the research, making transparent the choices behind the research process—from the phenomenon to the dissemination of findings—then more intellectually, ethically and reflexively rigorous research can be achieved (Rose, 1997). In my research, the importance of being reflexive emerged after being signposted by my Director of Studies to the work of Spivak (1988), in particular the notion of 'epistemic violence'.

3.3 | Reflexivity and my research

Research, I discovered, often imposes the closure of a given phenomenon (and thus the world) through representation, yet seldom do we consider what this representation entails, including how it is no less different to 'criminal violence' (Spivak, 1988). For example, by cutting the umbilical cord between the baby (one hermeneutic interpretation), its mother (the participant/s) and the maternal ward (the context), slowly sanitising the baby in the holy waters of theoretical knowledge, and then presenting that hermeneutic interpretation (crime) amongst many possible interpretations as knowledge or the truth (violence), research becomes something done to, not with, the participant/s (Teo, 2008, 2010, 2011). The researcher's role in the interpretation of findings—and production of knowledge—is typically, and often (un)intentionally, concealed within the text while their (problematic, criminally violent) role is forgotten, only for the next distanced, dispassionate and universal knower to come along and repeat the crime (Spivak, 1988). This stressed the significance of elucidating the decision-making processes behind my research, where I came to use principles of phenomenological reflexivity.

Phenomenological reflexivity advocates that the researcher explores the phenomenon as it appears immediately to the consciousness. To comprehend the 'lived experience' of consciousness (how the phenomenon appears to the consciousness), the researcher engages with reflection. Reflection, in this way, helps the researcher to seize the essence of the stream of consciousness, helping them to understand what, if anything, is happening in it. While phenomena usually supersede inanimate objects, it is the reflective act, for the purpose of this reflective piece, that is of central concern, where the researcher (phenomenologically) is thinking on thinking (Mortari, 2015). (For example, I will be thinking, precisely, about the critical incidents that may have shaped the development of aspects of my research.) To aid phenomenological reflexivity, I have used artefacts, such as dialogues with critical friends and song lyrics from the Arctic Monkeys latest album, *The Car*. Two research questions underpin this paper: (1)

What critical incidents have come to shape my ongoing doctoral study?; (2) What are the implications for novice researchers seeking to research teachers work?

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | I ain't quite where I think I am

Dispositions, as conceptualised by Ball (2003), were overused, too linear and static: teachers, under the terrorising influence of performativity, were only seen to operate within and between the logics of compliance, (partial) resistance and, recently, enjoyment (Frostenson & Englund, 2020). As a result, given my evolving positionality as a social, mostly ethnographically informed researcher, and after misspelling his name a dozen times, I was pointed in the direction of Pierre Bourdieu. Ontologically and sociologically, I esteemed Bourdieu's view of humans as individual agents of will and morality (micro), operating within social structures (macro). Moreover, despite his contemporaries stating otherwise, I valued what he had to say about neoliberalism and performativity, in that neoliberalism was a pervasive doxa that imposed itself on the reality of individual agents, restricting what was doable and thinkable (Bourdieu, 1990). However, his notion of habitus had seldom been utilised, particularly in relation to neoliberal performativity, despite its theoretical and methodological suitability for capturing the sophistication of dispositions given its conceptual ambiguity (Cottle, 2022). As a result, employing critical independent reflection, to suit my paradigmatical, positional and methodological beliefs, I reconceptualised pedagogical habitus as set of embodied dispositions that influence a teacher's ways of being, seeing, thinking and doing (Feldman, 2016). However, due to a paucity of these autonomous, ethereal experiences, seldom experienced by the novice researcher (Le Gallais, 2008), I also had to engage with critical friendship, which the next section aims to elaborate upon.

4.2 | How am I supposed to manage my infallible beliefs?

Bourdieu, and his theoretical tool of habitus, alongside the excitement of a new research phenomenon in neoliberal performativity, is used to frame the doctoral study. On these premises, I proceeded to devise my research title, aim and two research questions. Following discussions with my Director of Studies, the doctoral study's research aim—to examine the influence on neoliberalism performativity on teachers pedagogical habitus—and questions were overly assumptive. The term 'influence', it was suggested, assumed that performativity affects teachers pedagogical habitus and perhaps was not the most accurate for describing what will be researchable. As indicated previously, neoliberal performativity was likely to be more nuanced, especially given a large proportion of the primary sector are post-performative teachers (Wilkins et al., 2021).

Subsequently, my title—and research questions—had to be flexible enough to allow for this, with greater emphasis on how the performative technologies operate to shape habitus, assuming dialectical tensions and elements of resistance. Some teachers may develop a performative pedagogical habitus due to the influence of performative technologies, while others may ostensibly 'play the game' or intractably resist (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). Moreover, it was suggested that there could be elements of a two-way relationship, with teacher values and identities both working to negotiate the performative mechanisms and culture (O'Leary, 2013). Whilst this notion was useful to understand the operation of power through discourse, I had planned for an interpretivist paradigmatical design, which tends not to scrutinise the influence of social structures on the research phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Nevertheless, using Trede and Higgs (2009), I was able to (re)define my title—'neoliberal performativity and the pedagogical habitus of teachers'—and set of research questions to allow for resistance, as italicised below:

1. In what ways (*if at all*) do performative technologies influence teachers pedagogical habitus?
2. How (*if at all*) can teachers pedagogical habitus be maintained and/or supported?

4.3 | Gradually, it's coming into view

Communities of practice—through a shared domain of interest, such as researcher development—can function as a safe space where researchers try out new, unpolished ideas for size and/or make their work explicit, defending and debating them scholarly ways (Wenger, 2000). (Indeed, how do I know what I think, if I have not heard what I have got to say?) However, to ensure timely and honest disclosure, trust is critical, and while an exposure to different paradigmatical and theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches and topic areas can broaden a researcher's horizon, making them rounded scholars, it can confuse and alienate novice researchers (Wisker et al., 2007). Furthermore, some communities of practice only exist for a limited duration, are not self-sustaining and often evolve, if at all, inorganically. Nevertheless, despite my erstwhile childhood view of stable, objective and hard knowledge (that can only be advanced by observation, measurement and experiment), communities of practice can help novice researchers appreciate the collaborative enterprise of knowledge production, understanding that research is not an isolated practice and that we, upon completing our doctoral degree, become members of knowledge-sharing communities.

Over the taught doctoral programme, I became a member of two communities of practice. The first was a Professional Doctorate WhatsApp group, comprising of fellow cohort students, where general logistical matters were discussed, while the second, more intimate community—between three close friends and I—was where we defended and debated each other's research interests, paradigmatical positions and methodological choices; shared professional practice and our critiques of various literature; and posted examples of our writing to gain developmental feedback. As an industrious hoarder of knowledge, crystallising my emergent thinking filled me with trepidation, as my deliberations would indelibly be on public, digital platforms, where—given the proliferation of 'cancel culture'—my potentially myopic musings could come back to bite me. However, although both communities of practice failed to have a discernible effect on the development of my research, they gave me something much more: an academic voice. And, where before I was afraid to speak at the risk of making a mistake or offending somebody, I now think—and talk—in concert with others, synthesising this with skills development through academic modules and reflexive reading, which I now turn to discuss.

4.4 | Trying to adjust to what's been there all along

Dabbling in the interpretivist paradigm, I was questioned—and flummoxed—during a critical theory lecture, in an Advanced Education Research module during the taught element of my doctoral programme, that since the interpretivist paradigm values *all* knowledge claims, whose knowledge is the best? It was suggested that given the hierarchical, patriarchal and colonial pillars of positivism and interpretivism (the dominant forms of social research), an ideal speech situation must be created, where, after bringing all relevant participants and evidence into play, nothing apart from logical, reasoned argument is involved in reaching a consensus. However, I asked myself, when do such situations arise, given power is infused everywhere? Furthermore, although informed, committed action (praxis) can bring about social justice when dialogue is insufficient, are critical theorists reinforcing the same problem they wanted to change, by replacing one institution with another?—changing, for example, the gendered role of the family. Critical theorists, in other words, may not necessarily know what they are emancipating people towards.

Instead, it was with bedraggled, annotated pages of my reflexive reading before me (Pring, 2004; Scott & Usher, 2002), grappling with my streams of consciousness in response to ontological questions about the nature

of truth and reality (what exists in the world?), that I understood (since cognition was personal, and language was socially, culturally, politically and historically situated) multiple realities within various institutions existed. These realities were all constructed in the mind, relative to the perceiver and, based on our evolving experiences, soft and thus ungeneralisable. In other words, contrary to the assumptions of the positivist and critical paradigms, the tree's existence—and subsequent meaning—was dependent on my being there.

5 | CONCLUSION

This methodological paper demonstrates how positionality and critical incidents shaped the methodological decisions of a doctoral researcher researching teachers work before entering the field. Through principles of phenomenological reflexivity, I was able to acquire, develop and refine my theoretical ideas, research questions, academic voice and ontological and epistemological perspectives. This intersection occurred in four ways, which novice researchers should aim to both seek and engage with: critical independent reflection, participatory engagement with critical friendship, skills development through academic modules and reflexive reading, and communities of practice. The limitations of this work tend to lean towards the anecdotal tendencies and subjective stance, but within this is a rich and thick description which can be used as toolkit to guide early career scholars along the academic track. Future research may aim to explore methodological reflections on researching teachers work during and after entering the field, to paint a more holistic picture.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was report was the author (s). All permissions for figures obtained.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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